

# Lifelong Learning – Malaysian Perspective

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Presented at National Seminar on the Development of Technology and Technical-Vocational Education & Training in an Era of Globalization” 23-24 August 2005, Pan Pacific KLIA, Malaysia.

## 1.0 Introduction

Much of the attention related to the nation’s development and growth has focused on the education. Individuals have also noted education as the key to their success. Indeed education can enhance employability and knowledge workforce. However, only a small fraction of any nation has the privilege to graduate from the higher institution. As reported by UNESCO Statistic Montreal (2005), at the upper secondary level, global education ratio is 51% of upper school-age population and 45% only in East Asia. In Malaysia, total enrolment into tertiary education was reported as 2.4% of the population. Baring these figures in mind, where do the other millions of people turn to for their success? That is an important question to answer, more so with the ever competitive era. It is very unlikely the next few decades will witness larger number of graduates from the higher institutions, due to the limited resources. Thus, **Lifelong Learning** is the option or rather is the only means.

## 2.0 Interpretation of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong Learning is not a new subject in Malaysia or any civilisation. It is a connotation of learning from ‘cradle to grave’. There are many interpretations of the term lifelong learning but, for the purpose of this paper we will refer to the following definition:

“Lifelong learning can be defined as all purposeful learning activity undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence. It contains various forms of education and training, formal, non-formal and informal, e.g. the traditional school system from primary to tertiary level, free adult education, informal search and training, individually, in a group setting or within the framework of social movements.”(Häggström, 2005).

Lifelong learning is about all learning activities either through formal, informal and/or non-formal which, help to enhance the knowledge, skills, ability, experience and values, throughout an individual lifespan. As Häggström (2005) states that lifelong learning provides a more holistic view on education as it recognises any form of learning from any environment and with broader scope and consequences.

Lifelong learning is different to the traditional education systems. Here, learning does not just happen within the four walls of a school but it is beyond that. Unlike traditional learning, lifelong learning allows an individual to be an independent learner and takes charge of his/her own learning. According to a World Bank Report (2003), the traditional learning model differs from lifelong learning methods in several ways as denoted in Table1:

**Table 1: Traditional versus Lifelong Learning**

<b>Traditional learning</b>	<b>Lifelong learning</b>
<i>The teacher is the source of knowledge.</i>	<i>Educators are guides to sources of knowledge.</i>
<i>Learners receive knowledge from the teacher.</i>	<i>People learn by doing.</i>
<i>Learners work by themselves.</i>	<i>People learn in groups and from one another.</i>
<i>Tests are given to prevent progress until students have completely mastered a set of skills and to ration access to further learning.</i>	<i>Assessment is used to guide learning strategies and identify pathways for future learning.</i>
<i>All learners do the same thing.</i>	<i>Educators develop individualized learning plans.</i>
<i>Teachers receive initial training plus ad hoc in-service training.</i>	<i>Educators are lifelong learners. Initial training and ongoing professional development are linked.</i>
<i>“Good” learners are identified and permitted to continue their education.</i>	<i>People have access to learning opportunities over a lifetime.</i>

Source: World Bank Report (2003).

### **3.0 Lifelong Learning in Malaysia**

Lifelong learning has always articulated in Malaysia’s human resource development as underlined in Malaysia Plans. Malaysia Plans prior to the Fifth Plan, had focused on producing sufficient skilled manpower for the manufacturing sector, where skills upgrading and advanced training was first mentioned. The Fifth Malaysia Plan (1986 to 1990) noted that the rapid advances and changes in technology had made it as indicator for both the public and private sector to upgrade the skills of existing workers via in-service training and formal training (Mustafa, 2002).

Mustafa (2002) also reported that lifelong learning was also emphasised in the Sixth Malaysia Plan, when the country recognised the need to address the education demands of the youth who had dropped out of the formal system. It was during the Sixth Plan period when the Malaysian economy began to face serious labour shortages. The

National Skill Certification System was reviewed in 1992 to ensure a more coordinated and integrated approach in the education delivery system. The review revealed that there was a gap in the facilitation of upward mobility for the skilled workforce in the country. As a result, the review aimed to promote lifelong learning besides introducing Accreditation of Prior Achievement approach in 1996 under the Seventh Plan. It was done by recognising previously acquired competencies of the skilled workforce to facilitate their upward mobility.

### **3.1 Employability**

The rapid changes in technology and development, as stated by Anuwar (2005), has caused significant changes in societal and economic structures and in the world of work. The rising demand for highly skilled workers is evident today. Skills are becoming increasingly important in the knowledge economy, both for individuals and for countries. New skills are required to fulfil the requirements of the job, which involves a shift in labour demand moving away from workers with lower skill levels to those with higher skill levels.

In order for Malaysia to remain competitive, highly skilled and adequately trained workforce is a necessity. Each year thousands of graduates apply to enter the job market, but are they suitable for it. Because of these changes, having higher level of education does not suffice, people are required to regularly update and complement with specific skills through training and lifelong learning processes. This is apparent, as the country has reported unemployment rate of 3.5% of total labour force (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2005) which is believed that the majority are the fresh graduates. In this context lifelong learning can play an important role to upgrade their skills and knowledge to meet the demand for labour force. Hence, it will not only increase productivity of the workers but their competitiveness as well.

Lifelong learning provides employability opportunities to the various segments of the population. Therefore, it contributes to social cohesion and strengthening of democratic structures. In the developing countries such as Malaysia, lifelong learning can also be galvanised by reducing poverty and income inequalities within the communities. In addition, with lifelong learning culture we will be able to bridge the economic and social disparities between the Third world and advanced countries. (Anuwar, 2005).

### **3.2 Learning Society**

The very fact of discussing on the lifelong learning, it fuses that we live in a ‘learning society’. This also reflects the increasing centrality of knowledge and knowledge workers within the modern global economy. Edwards (1997) reveals that central to a learning society is the consequences of the changes in the economic, social and cultural challenges that are confronting individuals and social formations.

Learning society is the catalyst of the development of a knowledge society. Indeed, knowledge society is the most powerful resource. The emergence of a knowledge-based society is thus imperative for the survival in this era of globalisation and new technologies. A knowledge society, as said by Musa (2002), would require a conscious effort by the nation to inculcate information values that permeate the whole society and provide the necessary infrastructure and education in all aspects of commercial, technological, religious, cultural and other human activities in the society. In order to achieve this, a nation has to ensure that its people are literate.

However, despite of the various calls and campaigns from the government to promote the reading habits, Malaysians are not cultivated to reading culture. It is reported that the average reading rate in Malaysia is two books per year (Azrina, 2005). Even though enrollment ratios of lower secondary exceeds 90% (UNESCO Statistics, 2005), but the literacy rate is 88.70% as of 2002 (*definition*: age 15 and over can read and write) (CIA The World Factbook, 2005). Hence, as aptly said by Anuwar (2005), the route towards creation of knowledge society is non-other than lifelong learning.

In addition, Malaysia Grid for Learning which is being developed to enable Malaysians to gain access to online learning at all schools, colleges, universities, public libraries and community centres. These are some of the initiatives to create lifelong learning culture in schools and communities.

### **3.3 Promoting Lifelong Learning**

Malaysian government as stated above, has distinct promotion of lifelong learning and embedded it in the strategies and policies related to national human resource development, social, economic, and cultural development.

As Malaysia moves to become an industrialised nation, adverse effect is on the national labour markets. The increasing demand on the workers competencies related to skills cannot be adequately deal with a single-sided learning systems, which often do not address the requirement of the job market. As such, the need for vocational schools has multiplied significantly for providing technically skilled workers.

Besides that, The Ministry of Education promotes higher education through the distance learning programmes such as offered by Open University Malaysia. This offers opportunities for working adults to pursue their tertiary education while remaining in full-time employment. It is another milestone for recognising the importance of lifelong learning not only for the individual self-development but also the society and the nation.

Open University Malaysia with its newly established School of Lifelong Learning in February 2005, plans to engage in strategic partnerships with the government bodies and non-government bodies as well as with the surrounding communities via the 33 learning centres located nation wide. The evolvement of the learning centres as the lifelong learning centres and together with the support of the online learning facilities indicates

the paradigm shift where, learning is not restricted to delivery of education through traditional modes. It is rather learning at anytime and anywhere.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

Lifelong learning is for all, for anyone and everyone. It is not limited to learning in the school through the formal education system, but to learning informal and non-formal via diverse settings: at home, school, and at work. Malaysia has indicated an increased emphasis on lifelong learning for the growth and development of the society and economy. However, the society needs to adopt the lifelong learning culture to reap the benefits. Among potential advantages is improvement in the unemployment rates and development of literacy as well as the learning culture, for the awakening of knowledge society. Hence, it is evident that lifelong learning is a booster for the development of the nation.

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